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THE POLITICS OF HUNGER: THE SOVIET RESPONSE TO FAMINE, 1921

By CHARLES M. EDMONDSON

IN 1921 Russia fell prey to one of the worst famines of modern times. While accounts of the famine's dimensions vary, it is clear that it emanated from the traditionally drought-prone Volga region and reached east into the Urals, west into the Ukraine, and south into Transcaucasia. These areas contained approximately 37·5 million persons, several millions of whom were likely to perish without direct assistance.[1] Such potential human losses require no elaboration. The economic prospects were also bleak. If starving peasants consumed seed grain and livestock, agricultural productivity could be retarded for years. These were compelling reasons for famine relief. However, the Soviet regime did not possess the material capacity to vanquish the famine. In fact, the government could not realistically expect even to mitigate the worst possible consequences unless it took the most prompt and strenuous measures to utilize domestic resources and gain access to foreign assistance. These measures entailed serious political difficulties.

Anti-Bolshevik intellectuals in Russia could be expected to seek new life by ascribing responsibility for the famine to the Bolsheviks. Peasants increasingly resisted forcible grain requisitioning, and several armed rebellions, chiefly Antonov's in Tambov, were sufficiently successful to emphasize the danger in that trend. The growth of hunger in the great cities and several unpopular Bolshevik policies combined to alienate many who were previously loyal, developments underscored by the Kronstadt Mutiny and raucous conflict within the X Party Congress

[1] The most severely stricken gubernias were: Astrakhan, Tsaritsyn, Samara, Saratov, Simbirsk, the German Volga Commune, the Tatar Republic, Vyatka, Ufa, Uralsk, Orenburg, and Penza. The dimensions of the famine have been extrapolated from many different accounts. The most noteworthy of these sources are: *Izvestiya*, 16 September 1922; Glavnyi politiko-prosvetitel'nyi komitet, *Chto govoryat tsifry o golode?* (M., 1922), p. 3; Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del SSSR, *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 4 (M., 1958), pp. 251–3; League of Nations, Secretariat, *Report on Economic Conditions in Russia with Special Reference to the Famine of 1921–1922 and the State of Agriculture* (Geneva, 1922), p. 26; Comité des organisations russes réunies pour le secours aux affamés, *Mémoire rélatif à la famine en Russie* (Bruxelles, 1921), p. 6; Gibson to Hughes, 29 August 1921, U.S., National Archives, *Records of the Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1910–1929* (Washington, D.C., 1960), Microfilm Copy 316, Roll 101, frame 1283 (hereafter *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*).

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in March. It was readily conceivable to Lenin, at least, that these elements were dangerous and if catalyzed by a monstrous famine might even prove lethal to the Soviet regime.[2] This danger was intensified greatly by the potential renewal of foreign intervention under the guise of famine relief.

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The dilemma may be stated simply. If the Soviets launched a massive campaign, involving the solicitation of foreign help, to combat the human and economic aspects of the famine, they would be exposed to significant political risks. If the Soviets tried to minimize the danger of renewed political opposition in Russia and from abroad, they would be forced to ignore or 'underestimate' the famine and quietly accept serious loss of lives and economic damages.

An examination of the Soviet response to the famine shows that the latter course was followed. Having chosen the strategy of political survival, the Soviets then committed tactical errors which nearly undermined the strategy. Further, the factor which extricated the regime from the famine, foreign relief, became available, and was accepted by the Soviets largely as a consequence of these errors.

The prime requisite of combating famine is early detection. It is essential to any hope of eradicating the causes of a famine and vital for the alleviation of distress. There is no doubt that the Soviets had the opportunity for early detection and reaction. In November 1920 there

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were reports of drought and harvest failures in several areas.[3] Ostensibly, the government seized the opportunity. After investigating the reports in early December, the Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), acknowledged the possibility of 'localized famine', and created a special network of 'sowing committees' to arrest the decline in cultivated acreage by disseminating seeds and propagating drought-resistant techniques.[4]

aknowledges certain measures taking place

These measures never took effect. Within days the Eighth All-Russian Congress of Soviets had transformed the sowing committees into instruments of regulation rather than relief. Specifically, the Congress intensified the tactics and spirit of War Communism by adopting a plan of centrally regulated cultivation which required the sowing committees to take all seed reserves from peasants for the purpose of compiling a central seed fund.[5]

Given the mood of the peasant, failure was predictable. Only a

[2] V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol. IX (New York, 1943), pp. 89–90.
[3] *Pravda*, 14, 17, 18 November 1920.
[4] *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporyazhenii rabochego i krest'yanskogo pravitel'stva*, 1921, no. 1, art. 9, no. 2, art. 14.
[5] *Ibid.* Also, E. B. Genkina, 'V. I. Lenin i perekhod k novoi ekonomicheskoi politike', *Voprosy istorii*, 1964, no. 5, p. 24; I. I. Katorgin, *Kommunisticheskaya partiya v gody vosstanovleniya narodnogo khozyaistva, 1921–1922 g.g.* (M., 1955), p. 9; and *Bednota*, 30 December 1920.

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paltry seed fund was established, and the shrinkage of cultivated acreage actually accelerated.[6] The noteworthy factor here is that a government attempt to deal with the famine had not only failed but most probably exacerbated matters. The government's incapacity to combat famine had been demonstrated early.

As the harbingers of famine became unmistakable, the government seemed determined to avoid active failure. After receiving several reports of starvation, the use of surrogate food, and large-scale peasant migration from the Volga in January 1921,[7] VTsIK ordered its second investigation. The 'investigators' subsequently concluded that only five Central provinces faced the possibility of famine, and sanguinely prescribed reliance upon drought-resistant techniques.[8]

Soviet failure to admit openly the true gravity of the situation and to inaugurate relief measures cannot be explained as incompetence. It must be explained politically. The government did not possess food or seed reserves adequate for famine relief, and what it did possess was allocated for the hungry cities. The latter were the regime's only secure political bases, and official documents from early 1921 reveal an almost frantic insistence upon expediting food shipments to the cities.[9] These documents, and other sources, also indicated a rail crisis owing to wartime damages, negligence, fuel shortages, and bad weather.[10] It was, then, doubtful whether even the cities could be fed; and it was certain that the cities and the famine-stricken rural areas could not be supplied simultaneously. To admit the existence of a great famine, for which the regime would be held at least partially responsible, without the prospect of successful counteraction would have been impolitic. It might even have ignited a domestic opposition and renewed foreign intervention. Hence, humane and economic reasons compelled candidly energetic action which political exigencies imbued with unacceptable risks.

Under the circumstances, the regime needed to defuse the famine

[6] *Report on Economic Conditions in Russia . . .*, p. 26. Though the government later proclaimed the success of these measures, reports from the Commissariat of Food and an analysis in *Ekonomicheskaya zhizn'* made it clear that no seed fund was created (*Ekonomicheskaya zhizn'*, 5 March 1921, and *God bor'by s golodom: Uchastie narodnogo komissariata po prodovol'stviyu v dele pomoshchi golodayushchim* (M., 1922), pp. 13–14).

[7] One of the most dramatic warnings took the form of a letter composed by the great writer V. G. Korolenko and addressed to Maxim Gorky and the Commissar of Education, A. V. Lunacharsky. Korolenko had observed famine conditions in 1891–92, and his report of peasant migration and starvation could not be deemed a product of panic or exaggeration. Portions of the letter are reproduced in Russian Liberation Committee, *The Famine* (London, 1922), p. 1; and *New York Times*, 31 January 1921.

[8] *Sobranie uzakonenii . . .*, 1921, no. 14, art. 92, no. 49, art. 250.

[9] A. Naporko (ed.), *Zheleznodorozhnyi transport SSSR v dokumentakh kommunisticheskoi partii i sovetskogo pravitel'stva* (M., 1957), pp. 131–2.

[10] *Ibid.* Also, J. M. Westwood, *A History of Russian Railways* (London, 1964), p. 209; and *Mémoire rélatif à la famine en Russie*, p. 12.

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politically. In this context, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was relevant to the famine. The key agricultural provisions of NEP had nothing to do with direct famine relief. The replacement of grain requisitioning by a fixed taxation rate and the privilege of freely disposing of surpluses meant nothing to those peasants faced with starvation. Also, administrative bungling extended grain requisitioning past midsummer 1921, even along the Volga.[11] According to many famine refugees, this extension was the crucial difference between bare survival and utter ruination.[12] Perhaps the NEP stimulated recovery in those areas unafflicted by famine and eased urban hunger, but within the famine zone itself the grim march of hunger and epidemic was unimpeded. By promising to end grain requisitioning, however, NEP soothed tempers and erased the most obvious causal link between the regime and the famine. In its relationship to the famine, then, NEP could best be characterized as a political *cordon sanitaire* thoroughly compatible with the refusal to attempt conventional famine relief.

To understand fully why the Soviets felt constrained to ignore the famine's economic and human perils while minimizing its political impact, one must understand their impression of American food relief. In 1921, it was apparent that effective famine relief depended upon acquiring foreign, principally American, assistance. It was equally clear that such assistance would not be purely humanitarian.

The United States had long possessed the materials needed to alleviate starvation in Soviet Russia, as well as the mechanism—the American Relief Administration (ARA)—necessary to collect, deliver, and distribute the materials. The potential political advantages inherent in this situation were obvious. As early as June 1918 several American officials, including Vance McCormick, Chairman of the War Trade Board, William Redfield, Secretary of Commerce, Robert Lansing, Secretary of State, and Colonel House, 'friend' to Woodrow Wilson, discussed the possibility of establishing a special 'Russian Relief Commission'. They perceived the commission as an instrument of American influence, both political and economic, as an alternative to armed intervention in Russia, and as a means of preventing the spread of Bolshevism.[13] Although this plan was stillborn, the idea of food as a weapon against Bolshevism persisted.

[11] 'The Substitute Tax in Rye Units', Archives of the American Relief Administration, Russian Relief. Box 4, Folder No. 2. Held in the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford, California (hereafter AARA,RR). Also, Gibson to Hughes, 29 August 1921, *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 101, frame 1286.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] William A. Williams, *American-Russian Relations, 1787–1947* (New York, 1952), p. 149; and Charles Seymour (ed.), *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, vol. 3 (Boston, 1928), pp. 408–14, 417.

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In November House persuaded Wilson to form an 'International Relief Organization' under the directorship of Herbert Hoover for the purpose of stemming political disturbances in Central and Eastern Europe.[14] The project was blocked by Anglo-French objections to American domination of an 'international' agency and to the immediate extension of aid to Germany.[15] At Hoover's urgings, however, Wilson approved unilateral American food relief over much of Europe in December, presenting the Allies with a *fait accompli*. Hoover also persuaded Wilson to procure a Congressional relief appropriation and to create the American Relief Administration (ARA) as the sole executor of the appropriated funds.[16]

Fear of Bolshevism and its expansion was a prominent motive in these developments. In his arguments to Wilson, Hoover had written that 'there is incipient or practical Bolshevist control in many of the large centres' of Germany. Reminding the President that the original purpose in feeding Germany was the 'fundamental necessity to prevent anarchy', he solicited an official warning that the United States 'cannot anticipate furnishing food assistance to Germany through the hands of Bolshevik elements'. Such a warning, Hoover calculated, would probably 'eliminate the incipient Bolshevism in progress'.[17] Wilson seemed to agree with Hoover. He admonished Congress on 10 January 1919 that 'Bolshevism is steadily advancing westward . . . and is poisoning Germany. It cannot be stopped by force but it can be stopped by food'.[18] Less ambiguous statements of motivation can scarcely be imagined.

recolza la visió bolxevic de les intencions americanes i finalitat de la ARA

By April 1919 the idea of stopping the spread of Bolshevism by halting the spread of starvation, disease, and misery had evolved into a plan for strangulating Bolshevism by eradicating hunger in Russia itself. The stimulus for this development appears to have come from the American Chargé d'Affaires in Denmark, Ulysses Grant-Smith. On 23 December 1918 he cabled Lansing that 'the scarcity of food and its consequences will drive the bourgeoisie into the hands of the Bolsheviks if steps are not taken without delay . . . any one who brings food into Russia will be received with open arms and that distribution of food would secure Petrograd and Moscow'.[19] The message was not ignored.

[14] US Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1919. The Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1942), pp. 628–9 (hereafter, *FRUS, Paris Peace Conference*).
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 655.
[16] Herbert Hoover, *The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1958), pp. 99–100.
[17] *FRUS, Paris Peace Conference*, vol. 2, pp. 680–1.
[18] Quoted in John M. Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace* (Princeton, N.J., 1966), p. 223.
[19] US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918. Russia*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1931), p. 732 (hereafter *FRUS, Russia*).

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Vance McCormick, a vocal proponent of American economic penetration of Russia, began promoting 'food intervention' in Paris in January 1919. With strong support from Lansing, House, and Hoover, he won the assent of Wilson by 27 March.[20] But, if McCormick was the chief promoter of 'food intervention', Hoover was its principal ideologue.

By 28 March, Hoover conceived a specific plan and an explanation of its political and social logic. In a remarkable letter to Wilson, he characterized Bolshevism as a natural reaction to tyranny and human suffering. Bolshevik success was most frequent, he said, where 'the gulf between the middle classes is large and where the lower classes have been kept in ignorance and distress'. Hoover rejected any measure, e.g., military intervention, which might stimulate emotional support for the Bolsheviks. 'If former revolutions in ignorant masses are any guide,' he averred, 'the pendulum will yet swing back to some moderate position when bitter experience has taught the economic and social follies of present obsessions.' He thus recommended food relief for Russia on the grounds that it would terminate hostilities and promote 'stabilization', test the militancy of Bolshevism, and 'determine whether the Russian people will not themselves swing back to moderation'.[21]

Hoover's explanation was evidently effective. On 17 April, the Council of Four agreed that a 'neutral' relief commission, headed by Dr. Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian explorer, and supplied by the ARA, could provide food for Russia, but only upon specified conditions. The Council stipulated that Russian transport must be placed under the supervision of the 'neutral' relief commission; the distribution of food must be vested not in the government but in the 'Russian people of each locality'; and all hostilities, troop movements, and shipments of military supplies must be stopped.[22] To put it mildly, these conditions were not designed to benefit the Bolsheviks.

The proposal was sent by Nansen and reached Moscow on 4 May. Three days later, the Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs, G. V. Chicherin, replied. Chicherin praised Nansen's humanitarian instincts, but he castigated the Council of Four's conditions as a perversion of charity. He went on to attribute the grievous conditions in Russia to the machinations of the Allies and the White Armies. 'This being the case,' stated Chicherin, 'we are prepared to discuss the cessation of hostilities only if we discuss the entire problem of our relations . . . with

[20] Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 230–3.

[21] Excerpts of Hoover's letter are reproduced in a number of sources. The most complete are found in H. H. Fisher, *The Famine in Soviet Russia, 1919–1923: The Operations of the American Relief Administration* (New York, 1927), pp. 11–14; Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919* (New York, 1967), pp. 478–83; Hoover, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–19; and *FRUS, 1918, Russia*, vol. 1, pp. 100–2.

[22] *FRUS, 1919, Russia*, pp. 108–9.

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the Associated Governments. That means to discuss peace and to open real negotiations dealing with the true reasons for the war waged upon us and with those conditions that can bring us lasting peace.' He indicated that the Soviet government was willing to discuss with Nansen the 'non-political' aspects of the proposal, but that in its original form the proposal was completely unacceptable.[23] When Nansen did seek private discussions with the Soviets, Hoover blocked the attempt.[24] Subsequently, the Council of Four rejected the entire Soviet note, and the scheme of 'food intervention' languished.[25]

Meanwhile, the Allies continued to help the White forces in the Russian Civil War, with the ARA playing a visible role. The ARA procured and delivered food to the Whites and provided some supplies of direct military value. This aid was rendered on generous terms which contrasted sharply with the conditions earlier demanded of the Bolsheviks.[26]

In the unlikely event of Soviet leaders having forgotten these matters, there was a reminder in April 1921 that American food relief could be dangerous. T. T. C. Gregory, chief ARA administrator in Central Europe in 1919, published in *The World's Work* the first of three articles explaining the collapse of Bela Kun's Hungarian Soviet Republic. According to Gregory, the Hungarian Soviet fell largely because the promise of ARA food had been used to ignite a counter-revolution. To Gregory, a self-styled 'two fisted San Francisco lawyer', this affair had proved 'indisputably the power of food and economic factors as modern weapons for the curtailing of unconscionable political ambitions'.[27]

The political potency of American food attracted the interest of many anti-Bolshevik Russians. Encouraged by the Kronstadt mutiny, several Russian émigré organizations tried in March to win American help. Pledging to liberate Russia, they asked President Harding to supply them with the weapons of food and medicines.[28] In retrospect these forlorn appeals may seem trivial. But foreign intervention was too recent an experience (Japanese troops still occupied parts of Russian Far Eastern territories), and the notion of 'food intervention' recurred too often for Soviet leaders to discontinue the practice of ignoring the famine. However, by May this practice encountered new difficulties.

[23] *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 2, pp. 154–9.
[24] *FRUS, 1919, Russia*, p. 115.
[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 351–2. [26] The terms for ARA aid are stipulated *ibid.*, pp. 693–6.
[27] T. T. C. Gregory, 'Stemming the Red Tide', *The World's Work*, vol. XLI (April 1921), pp. 608–10. See also George W. Hopkins, 'The Politics of Food: the United States and Soviet Hungary, August, 1919', *Mid-America*, vol. 55 (October 1973).
[28] Sakharov to Hughes, 9 March 1921, *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 101, frame 0046; Goutchkoff to Harding, 9 March 1921, *ibid.*, frame 0010; and Davidoff to Harding, 10 March 1921, *ibid.*, frame 0033.

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Signs of famine had become unmistakable by late spring 1921. In May, a group of intellectuals, led by S. N. Prokopovich, formerly a leading 'Economist' and Minister of Food in the Provisional Government, Ekaterina Kuskova, wife of Prokopovich and herself a prominent Economist, and N. M. Kishkin, a well-known Cadet, approached the government with warnings of famine and an offer of their service in relief activities. The official response was derisive and threatening.[29] Since these three persons were politically odious to the Bolsheviks, the response is not surprising. It is interesting, however, that Lenin promptly began urging Leonid Krasin, Commissar of Foreign Trade, to explore the possibility of purchasing food and seeds abroad.[30]

On 10 June, Professor A. A. Rybnikov of Saratov delivered a report on the famine to an agronomical society in Moscow. Describing the misery of the Volga provinces in detail, Rybnikov estimated that the situation was so desperate that 100 million puds (a pud is 36·2 pounds) of grain were required to avert total ruin.[31] The report was sensational enough for VTsIK to appoint an investigative commission. The purpose of the commission was more obfuscatory than investigative. After 34 days of 'work' it would recommend nothing more substantive than another investigation.[32] However, the limits of obfuscation had been reached. Inspired by Rybnikov's report, Prokopovich, Kuskova, and Kishkin again approached the government to seek permission to organize a public famine relief agency. Rebuffed by officials, they persuaded Maxim Gorky to intercede with Lenin.[33] This tactic produced success. Lenin agreed to the formation of a public relief agency, and on 2 July VTsIK formally announced the impending appointment of the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee.[34]

When it was officially chartered, on 21 July, the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee had a membership of 63. Consisting mostly of celebrities such as Gorky, Stanislavsky, and a daughter of Tolstoi, the committee also included ten Bolsheviks, the most prominent of whom were Kamenev, Lunacharsky, and Krasin. However, the most striking names on the committee were those of anti-Bolshevik activists such as

[29] 'Soviet Authorities Disregarded Warning of Coming Famine', AARA, RR, Box 106, Folder No. 1.

[30] *Leninskii sbornik*, vol. 35, p. 246. Quoted in N. L. Rubinshtein, *Vneshnyaya politika sovetskogo gosudarstva v 1921–1925 godakh* (M., 1953), pp. 91–92; *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 4, p. 112.

[31] 'Report of Professor Rybnikov to the All-Russian Agricultural Congress and the Moscow Society for the Furtherance of Agriculture', *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 101, frame 0503.

[32] Tsentral'naya komissiya pomoshchi golodayushchim, *Itogi bor'by s golodom v 1921–1922 g.g. Sbornik statei i otchetov* (M., 1922), pp. 10–11.

[33] Ekaterina Kuskova, 'Mesyats "soglashatel'stva" ', *Volya Rossii*, 1928, no. 3, pp. 59–60, 67; Jerome Landfield, 'The Relief of the Starving Russians', *The American Review of Reviews*, vol. 64 (September 1921), p. 270.

[34] Kuskova, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

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Prokopovich, Kuskova, Kishkin, Golovin, Kutler, and the old terrorist heroine Vera Figner.[35]

VTsIK also granted imposing legal stature to the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee. It was empowered to acquire any supplies necessary from domestic or foreign sources, to establish public works projects, to form a network of relief bodies, to solicit and collect donations in Russia or from abroad without interference, to issue books, pamphlets, newspapers and bulletins, to convene conferences on any matters relevant to the famine, and to enjoy full cooperation from state agencies while being immune from normal state supervision.[36]

Only the naive would accept such powers at face value. Whatever Lenin intended, it surely did not include the creation of a truly potent public body. In fact, several Bolsheviks expressed fears that such a public relief agency, i.e., led by persons who were anathema to the Bolsheviks, would encourage counter-revolutionary hopes.[37] Lenin sought to allay these fears by invoking the potential use of the Cheka and the supervisory role of Bolsheviks on the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee.[38] He also argued that the members of the All-Russian Relief Committee were the only people in the country who were capable of eliciting foreign assistance but who lacked the domestic popularity to exploit the famine politically.[39] As Lenin reassured a critic of this public committee: 'From Kuskova, we will get her name, her signature and a few carloads of food from people like her . . . and NOTHING [sic] more.'[40]

There is further evidence that the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee was intended to play only a limited role. On 18 July VTsIK created a governmental relief agency, Pomgol (*Komitet pomoshchi golodayushchim*). Directed by Lev Kamenev, also a member of the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee, Pomgol was a singularly unimpressive agency. Charged with forming and coordinating a network of relief committees at each level of government, Pomgol was totally dependent upon other state organs for finance, supplies, and transport.[41] This dependency immediately reduced Pomgol to ineffectiveness.[42] In

[35] All committee members are listed *ibid.*, pp. 67–68, and Landfield, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

[36] *Pravda*, 23 July 1921; and Kuskova, *op. cit.*, pp. 66–67.

[37] The more vocal critics were Radek, Bukharin, Semashko, and Dzerzhinsky; Young to Hughes, 5 September 1921, *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 101, frame 1390.

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] *Ibid.* Also, Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (New York, 1925), p. 233.

[40] V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (M., 1965), vol. 53, pp. 24–25.

[41] *Sobranie uzakonenii . . .*, 1921, no. 55, art. 342; Glavnyi politiko-prosvetitel'nyi komitet, *Nakaz mestnym komissiyam pomoshchi golodayushchim* (M., 1922), p. 112.

[42] An example of Pomgol's dependence may be found in matters of finance. The Commissariat of Finance delivered no more than half of the funds requested by Pomgol, and provided no funds at all in many gubernias after January 1922 (Boris de

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fact, Pomgol would feed no one until late October 1921.[43] In the light of this, and the timing of its creation, it is not unreasonable to assume that Pomgol's sole purpose was to supplant the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee if the latter proved troublesome.

With the decision to permit the formation of the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee the government abandoned the practice of ignoring the famine. On 26 June *Pravda* tersely reported that hunger already enveloped seven provinces with a population of 25 million persons.[44] Four days later the party organ further characterized the famine as 'the beginning of a real disaster which will certainly embrace the entire country if the most resolute measures are not taken immediately'.[45] *Izvestiya* was equally candid, admitting widespread crop failures, massive peasant flight, and even panic among party workers in the stricken areas.[46]

There were more startling admissions in July. A *Segodnya* editorial of 20 July observed that the state possessed no food or seed reserves for use in famine relief.[47] Also, M. I. Kalinin, who had presided over earlier governmental 'investigations' of the famine now succinctly acknowledged that the government 'simply cannot combat this problem in its entirety'.[48]

One purpose of such admissions of governmental inability to cope with the famine was the desire to evoke sympathy from persons and groups in the West which might respond to appeals for help. These appeals were not addressed to foreign governments. Lenin neither sought nor expected aid from official foreign sources;[49] Grigory Zinoviev publicly ruled out the possibility of obtaining help from foreign governments as late as 22 July.[50] Indeed, Maxim Gorky's dramatic foreign appeal of 13 July, issued on behalf of the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee, was addressed pointedly to 'all honest persons' rather than to foreign heads of state.[51]

Tef'e (ed.), *Chernaya godina: Sbornik o golode v Tsaritsynskoi gubernii i obzor deyatel'nosti gubkompomgola* (Tsaritsyn, 1922), p. 18; 'Famine Relief and Finances: Delivery of Money by the Russian Central Famine Relief Committee to Local Relief Committees', AARA, RR, Box 106, Folder No. 1).

[43] *Itogi bor'by* . . . (see footnote 32), p. 72.

[44] *Pravda*, 26 June 1921. The famine's dimensions were never reported consistently. According to *Izvestiya*, 27 July 1921, ten provinces, rather than seven, were stricken although the affected population was put at 25 million.

[45] *Pravda*, 30 June 1921.

[46] *Izvestiya*, 15 July 1921. The existence of panic was corroborated by radio messages from Moscow which implored party and government workers to remain calm. These messages were transcribed in Constantinople (Bristol to Hughes, 26 July 1921, *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 101, frame 0714).

[47] *Segodnya*, 20 July 1921.

[48] *Bednota*, 22 July 1921.

[49] Jorgen Schleimann, 'The Organisation Man: The Life and Work of Willi Münzenberg', *Survey*, vol 55 (April 1965), p. 71.

[50] *Pravda*, 23 July 1921.

[51] *FRUS, 1921, Russia*, vol. 2, p. 805.

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When Herbert Hoover replied to Gorky's appeal on 23 July, offering the assistance of the ARA, Soviet leaders were almost certainly taken by surprise.[52] It is also unlikely that they anticipated positive results from the offer. Hoover's conditions for rendering aid, though markedly less onerous than in 1919, hardly inspired confidence among the Soviets. Hoover demanded the immediate release of all Americans incarcerated in Russia, and guarantees from the Soviet government that ARA personnel would enjoy full liberty of movement, complete freedom in choosing Russians to serve on food distribution committees, and total immunity from Soviet authority.[53]

While the Soviets accepted these conditions as a basis for negotiations, they manifested little optimism. An editorial in *Krasnaya gazeta* on 30 July not only discounted hopes of ARA help, but cautioned that 'bourgeois governments will try again, profiting by the famine . . . to tame Soviet Russia'.[54] A few days later the same newspaper characterized Hoover as a 'Greek bearing gifts'.[55] Lenin himself accused bourgeois governments of forming 'new plans for further invasions, interventions, and counter-revolutionary conspiracies'. Accordingly, he directed no appeal for foreign help to governments, but instead demanded help from foreign workers and small farmers.[56]

These statements were not merely the products of ritualistic propaganda. Benjamin M. Weissman has shown that ARA-Soviet negotiations were virtually stalemated between 14 and 19 August.[57] Moreover, the appearance of the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee and official admissions of inability to cope with the famine combined to project an image of Soviet vulnerability. Abroad, this image inspired a new flurry of anti-Bolshevik schemes, mostly centring upon the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee.

A great many Russian émigrés were attracted by the possibility of exploiting Soviet weakness. Many openly aspired to transform the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee into a new provisional government.[58] It also appears that the Committee met with an unexpectedly warm response from the Russian public, a development which may have

[52] Schmedeman to Hughes, 15 July 1921, *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 101, frames 0543, 0544; *FRUS, 1921, Russia*, vol. 2, p. 798; and Benjamin M. Weissman, *Herbert Hoover and Famine Relief to Soviet Russia, 1921–1923* (Stanford, 1974), p. 10.

[53] Hoover also demanded that the Soviets admit in writing their need for ARA assistance, that they pay for the shipment and storage of supplies, and that no recipient of ARA food should be denied normal Soviet rations (*FRUS, 1921, Russia*, vol. 2, pp. 807–8).

[54] *Krasnaya gazeta*, 30 July 1921.

[55] *Ibid.*, 18 August 1921. The Soviet press also devoted a good deal of attention to Gregory's version of the fall of the Hungarian Soviet in 1919.

[56] *Pravda*, 6 August 1921; and *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 4, p. 250.

[57] Weissman, *op. cit.*, pp. 58–62.

[58] E. Kuskova, 'Mesyats "soglashatel'stva" ', *Volya Rossii*, 1928, no. 5, p. 70; Rubinshtein, *op. cit.*, pp. 96, 120.

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worried Lenin and the Cheka.[59] More important, the Committee aroused considerable interest among some foreign officials. In early August there was open discussion in the British parliament of the political leverage inherent in using the Committee as the sole distributor of foreign relief.[60] The same note was sounded in the conservative press of France, and the French representative to the Allied Supreme Council bluntly advised that the Committee be utilized as a future coalition government for Russia.[61]

By late August the Allied Supreme Council had decided to form an international Russian Relief Committee to offer aid to Russia through the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee.[62] There were certain conditions, of course. As stipulated in a note signed by Joseph Noulens, former French Ambassador to tsarist Russia and a notoriously avid interventionist, the most important conditions were that the Allied Supreme Council be allowed to investigate fully, and without Soviet supervision, any matters it deemed germane to the famine or Soviet relief capabilities, and that Soviet Russia acknowledge the legitimacy of tsarist debts.[63] The American government seemed convinced that this was only a blatantly political scheme of 'food intervention'.[64] The Soviets never considered any other possibility.[65]

This development seems to have been crucial. The Soviets had dropped the strategy of avoiding political difficulty by ignoring the famine in favour of creating a harmless public committee to attract foreign charity. The committee proved to be far from harmless as it attracted the keen interest of enemies of Soviet Russia and resurrected the spectre of intervention. To be sure, the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee could be eliminated,[66] and the Allied Supreme Council's conditions could be righteously rejected.[67] However, in its haste to awaken the conscience of sympathetic individuals in the West, the government had admitted in detail the scope of the famine and exposed its own inadequacy to offer relief. Such a position was, at a minimum, embarrassing and perhaps politically dangerous. The only option left to the Soviets was to acquire relief by dealing with the ARA.

[59] Kuskova, *Volya Rossii*, 1928, no. 5, pp. 68, 76.
[60] Harvey to Hughes, 25 August 1921, *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 101, frame 1068; Rubinshtein, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
[61] Rubinshtein, *op. cit.*, pp. 112–13. [62] *FRUS, 1921, Russia*, vol. 2, p. 820.
[63] Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 66; Rubinshtein, *op. cit.*, pp. 115–17.
[64] *FRUS, 1921, Russia*, vol. 2, p. 820; Poole to Hughes, 15 September 1921, *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 103, frame 0354.
[65] *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 4, pp. 307–11.
[66] Information on the liquidation of the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee and the arrest of several of its members is given in Kuskova, *Volya Rossii*, 1928, no. 5, pp. 73–78.
[67] The Soviet reply to the Noulens note was sent on 7 September 1921. In all likelihood it is one of the most emotional and vitriolic diplomatic communications ever issued by the Soviets (*Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 4, pp. 307–11).

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In contrast to the British and French, Hoover had ignored the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee and insisted upon negotiating directly with the Soviet government. Not only was this less threatening to the Soviets but it even raised some slight hope for establishing official relations with the United States.[68] The Soviets may have also hoped that the Allied Supreme Council's tactics would make Hoover less intractable, given his demonstrated penchant for controlling all relief activities in a country.[69]

On 12 August, just as the plans of the Allied Supreme Council were crystallizing publicly, the Soviets secretly moved to reach an agreement with the ARA. A Soviet representative, identified only as Mr. Rubinstein, delivered a message to the American Commissioner in Warsaw promising that the Soviet government would respect ARA personnel and 'spare no effort to facilitate their labours and protect them against annoyances and misunderstandings'. Karakhan, head of the Soviet mission in Warsaw, confirmed and approved this statement.[70] The message reached Washington on 18 August. Within 24 hours an ARA-Soviet agreement was concluded on terms which were only slightly less rigid than those Hoover originally proposed.[71] The results of the agreement are well known. ARA activities fed over ten million persons by August 1922,[72] and more than any other factor prevented an unprecedented calamity.

The Soviets had blundered into an escape from the worst consequences of the famine. Lacking the resources and efficiency to defeat the menace of famine, the government had chosen to underestimate, and even ignore, its true size and seriousness. This policy reflected a willingness to absorb tremendous human and material losses in order to minimize political consequences. These losses would certainly have happened had not the government miscalculated the effects of creating the All-Russian Famine Relief Committee and then, to evade the consequences of miscalculation, accepted the assistance of the ARA. The Soviet response to the famine was sufficiently clumsy to cost several million lives by delaying effective relief while failing to achieve the primary goal of political safety. That the regime emerged unscathed and ten million victims of hunger survived was simply fortuitous.

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[68] Weissman, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 107; *FRUS, 1921, Russia*, vol. 2, p. 821.
[70] Gibson to Hughes, 18 August 1921, *Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Roll 101, frame 1044.
[71] *FRUS, 1921, Russia*, vol. 2, pp. 813–17.
[72] Tsentral'naya komissiya pomoshchi golodayushchim, *Itogi posledgol s 15/X—1922 g. 1/VIII—1923 g.* (M., 1923), p. 65.

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